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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
28 June 1984

Castro to free Americans in Cuba

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HAVANA — The Rev. Jesse Jackson left for Nicaragua yesterday, after winning Cuban President Fidel Castro's agreement to release about 22 American prisoners. Jackson plans to return here today to pick them up.

Arrangements were being made for the release of the prisoners — most of them convicted by Cuban courts on drug charges — after Castro announced early yesterday that they were free to return to the United States.

Jackson held an emotional meeting with the Americans yesterday afternoon at the Combinado del Este prison, 15 miles from Havana. One prisoner cried as the Baptist minister told them they would be returning "to their relatives, their God and the judicial process."

Prisoners shouted "God bless you" and "Thank you very much." As he left, Jackson said, "Don't get caught in any bad behavior." Replied one prisoner, "We'll be on our best behavior."

A spokesman at the U.S. Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy here said that fewer than half the prisoners were wanted on arrest warrants in the United States. The ones who are will be arrested upon their return, according to the Justice Department in Washington.

The U.S. diplomat in Havana also said it was not certain that all 22 prisoners would return, as Jackson had announced. The official, who asked not to be identified, said some of the prisoners might choose to remain in Cuba rather than face charges in the United States.

"These are small-time drug traffickers that have to be pretty dumb to be caught here with drugs in a place like Cuba," the diplomat said.

Asked whether there was much doubt that the Americans were guilty, the diplomat said that although they had not been represented by lawyers in their trials here, evidence had been presented against them.

Jackson said he planned to take the prisoners to the United States in the chartered 707 that he and his entourage of aides, friends, Secret Service agents and journalists are using for his six-day, four-nation Latin American tour.

The joint communique issued early yesterday by Castro and Jackson said the Cuban leader has also agreed to let Andres Vargas Gomez, 69, a Cuban and former CIA agent, go to the United States to live.

Gomez, whose wife and daughter live in Miami, was arrested at the time of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and held in Cuban jails for 22 years. For the last year and a half, Gomez has been out of jail but forbidden to leave the country.

"I'm very grateful to Mr. Jackson," Gomez told an interviewer on NBC's "Today" show. "I hope to meet him soon to thank him in person ... The first thing I'm going to do after I kiss

my wife and daughter is go to church and thank God."

They also agreed to begin negotiations with U.S. officials concerning the possible return to Cuba of criminals sent to the United States as part of the 1980 boat exodus.

The State Department wants Castro to take back some 1,500 people being held in federal prisons. Castro dropped his insistence that talks over the prisoners be delayed until after the U.S. presidential elections in November. A State Department spokesman said the United States would "welcome" an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Further, Cuba agreed to exchange ambassadors with the United States if the United States agrees and to consider the release of Cuban political prisoners in jail here. Castro emphasized, however, that he made "no commitment" to Jackson on this.

Some of the 10 points of agreement between Castro and Jackson, which were announced in their joint press conference at the Palace of the Revolution here, were of minor significance.

One point, for instance, noted Castro's support for a July 1 anti-war demonstration Jackson is organizing at the U.S.-Mexican border near San Diego.